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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement in education, focusing on the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs is discussed. The standards emphasize the importance of communication between home and school; promoting and supporting parenting skills; the parent's role in student learning; parents as volunteers; parents as full partners in decision making and advocacy; and collaborating with the community. The paper examines each of the standards and focuses on what a successful program should look like. It also outlines a more formal approach to implementing the standards in a school or program. The seven steps are: creating an action team; examining current practice; developing an improvement plan; developing a written parent/family involvement policy; securing support; providing training for project/program staff; and evaluating and revising the plan. Overall, the paper asks schools to value and include parents and families in order to improve education. (SM)

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The National PTAs National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs

The following presentation was given by Cara Lockett, Parent Involvement Project Team Leader for National PTA, at the 8th annual conference on "Creating the Quality School" in Memphis, Tennesse, March, 1998.

It's exciting for me to be here to talk with you about one of the most important topics today, parent involvement, and specifically about the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. I would like to begin by clarifying that although we use the term "parent" involvement, we need to remember that "parent" can also mean other adults who play an important role in a child's life. The National PTA recognizes that many other adults like grandparents, aunts, uncles, step-parents, and guardians often carry the primary responsibilities for a child, so we want to include them as well.

As you are aware, parent involvement is THE hot topic in education today. Since many states are restructuring their educational systems, attention is being given to the findings of years of research about education theories and practices. As a result, we are all becoming more familiar with research that demonstrates the importance of parent and family involvement.

Somehow, I think we've always known that parents are critical to a child's academic success, but until recently we failed to notice that parent involvement is the only factor that always results in improved student performance. If you have read A New Generation of Evidence or other publications by Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla, you know that their compilations of research validate the importance of parent and family involvement as the most consistent predictor of student success in all demographic groups and across all socioeconomic lines.

So many parents today feel that they are not qualified to be really effective in their child's education. I have the opportunity to talk to many parents, and the one message I consistently hear is that they believe they aren't involved and they feel guilty about it. Unfortunately, we have come to define parent involvement very narrowly, only as volunteering. For most parents, volunteering is simply not something they can do, due to their jobs or family commitments. But anyone who lives in the same home as a child is involved with that child at some level. Our goal is to make that involvement as powerful and effective as possible. The National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs are intended to help do just that.

The standards are based on the work of Dr. Joyce Epstein, of Johns Hopkins University, who is one of the long-time researchers and supporters of effective parent involvement. She has identified six distinct components, each with unique benefits. Working with other parents, educators, and practitioners, National PTA has added a clearly defined standard to match each component, and I would like to share those standards with you briefly now.

We would also like to emphasize that whenever we refer to "schools" in these standards, we are broadening that definition to include any other business or community-based programs that involve children and their families, as these same standards would apply in those settings as well.

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Communicating—Communication between the home and the school is regular, two-way, and meaningful. Those of you familiar with Dr. Epstein's work will notice that we rearranged the order she originally used and put this standard first. This is because we feel so strongly that communication is the foundation of all programs wanting to reach out to parents and families. The key words here are regular, two-way, and meaningful. We need to recognize that parents are the experts on their child and have much to offer when brought into the discussion on a consistent basis.

Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported. The most important support a child can receive comes from home and family. I think we all agree it's not the school's or program's responsibility to teach parents how to parent. However, schools can support and affirm the skills needed by parents by providing parenting resources or by informing parents of other available community services.

Student Learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning. This role is probably the one area where we as parents feel the least qualified. Even if we were successful students ourselves, and certainly not all parents were, we are still faced with the fact that, as our students progress, they are taking subjects that we don't understand. Many children are taking classes in subjects that didn't even exist when we were in school! Parents need guidance from teachers and administrators about specific ways they can support their child's learning, especially when parents no longer feel adequate to help with the homework.

Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance is sought. This is probably the one area where we are most successful in involving parents, especially at the elementary school level. But we need to remember that in order to recruit and keep volunteers involved, they need to be involved in volunteer experiences that are truly helpful and meaningful to them.

Decision Making and Advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families. This standard does not mean that parents are involved only in the decisions affecting their own children, but in any decision that touches the lives of all children. Many schools are moving toward site-based management, which offers parents a formalized role as child advocates. The key here is to remember that parents are viewed as full partners in the decision-making process.

Collaborating with Community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, family, and student learning. Many families are simply unaware of what opportunities are available through their communities, whether it be how to get a son enrolled in Boy Scouts or finding a counselor for a troubled child. In addition, many businesses, employers, and senior citizens are uninvolved and need encouragement and information about specific ways they can become a part of supporting the children and families in their communities.

Let's go over these six standards in more detail, and focus on what a successful program ought to look like.

Six Standards Revisited
In order to have comprehensive gains in parent and family involvement, a program must undertake activities in each of the six standard areas. If activities are limited to one or two standards—say, volunteering and communicating—the gains will be beneficial, but limited. The six standards work together. They balance each other. Success is dependent on making sure you have all the pieces of the puzzle.

Standard I: Communicating—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful. Communication is the foundation of a solid partnership. When people communicate effectively, positive relationships develop and greater progress can be made. Too often, the communication between parents and teachers is one-way, with the school telling the parent how the child is doing. Parents should tell the teachers about the student at home, as well as teachers telling about the child at school. Both parents and teachers have to voice information that is vital to student success such as learning preferences, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

You should include a variety of communication tools and ways to encourage two-way interaction between parents and teachers, parents and school administrators, and parents and your community.

The following are some suggestions:

- Promote parent-teacher conferences by thinking of ways to assist parents in feeling more welcome and prepared for the conference. Work with school staff to develop a Preparing for Parent-Teacher Conferences publication or flier with sample questions, to assist parents in meeting with teachers. At the conference, always begin by focusing on the most positive information about the student's performance to build a common ground of support on the student's behalf. One principal requires that teachers make three positive remarks for every negative one about their students. Sometimes even practical changes to the classroom environment can make a big difference in welcoming parents. One teacher reports more positive conferences since adding rocking chairs to her room. As teacher and parents rock in the chairs, a more open atmosphere is created allowing each to work off stress and relax as they focus on how to best help their student achieve academic success.
- Publicize the hours when administrators and teachers are available for parent visits and procedures for contacting teachers on the telephone or in writing.

- Advocate before school policymakers regarding the need for staff to have adequate access to telephones and other means of communication. Encourage both parents and teachers to make introductory phone calls to exchange contact information and ask if there is anything either should know about the student or, simply to say, "Please let me know if anything comes up."

- At "Back to School Night" and/or a faculty or program meeting, present a "How to Partner" role play of a parent-teacher conference, showing how everyone involved can more effectively partner together on behalf of students. Encourage teachers to distribute a class syllabus outlining work required for their classroom, or present a summary of their approach to teaching. Include major project deadline dates, curriculum topics to be covered, and special classroom policies. For

other program settings, provide similar kinds of information that help parents understand the goals and purposes of your programs.

Standard II: Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

So many parents feel incapable of the job of child-rearing, especially when their child reaches adolescence. They also feel guilty when their child has a problem in school, as if it means they are "bad" parents. Schools and other programs can do much to build up parents' self-confidence, if they are sensitive to parents' feelings, and if they provide information about where parents can receive help and support when needed. The school or program staff that recognizes parent roles and responsibilities, asks parents what support they need, and works to find ways to meet those needs, is saying "we value you and respect your role as a parent." Communicating a respectful attitude toward parents and providing support resources for them are important ways to build high-quality programs.

- Help create an accessible parent/family information and resource center in your school or community that offers training, resources, and other services to help parents.
- Provide special publications for parents, like a principal's newsletter, which give helpful tips and parenting information from the principal's perspective.
- Host a parent class on a topic of interest to parents, like "How to Live with an Adolescent."
- Start a parent book club through your parent resource center or school library.
- Create "Together Grams," a half-sheet flier with one activity idea for parents to do with their children, such as "Talk to your children about when you were their age." On the back, provide information about why the activity is valuable for kids and how it supports academic learning.

Standard III: Student Learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning. Student learning increases when parents are invited into the process. When a school enlists parents, it provides a valuable support system and creates a team that is working for each child's success. Many parents want to help their children with homework and school projects, but they just don't know what is most helpful or appropriate. This is where teachers and schools can really make a difference in helping to develop programs that teach parents how to foster learning at home, monitor homework and progress, and give feedback to teachers. Another important role for educators and program administrators is to help train parents on student learning issues such as what each child should know at a particular age or grade level. Provide clear and understandable information on child development, such as the findings of recent research studies on children's brain development and the implications for parents and educators alike.

- Encourage teachers to provide specific information to parents about what students are studying in school and to offer ideas to support students' learning through family activities in the home or through community events like museum exhibits, library resources, or other community support.
- Sponsor study skills sessions where parents come with their students to learn how to improve grades and study habits. Specify that a parent attending with the student tends to increase the effectiveness of these sessions since many parents may not have had this training.

- Include a "Did You Know?" column in each school newsletter, highlighting the research in the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs booklet on how parent involvement affects student success.

Standard IV: Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

Some communities already have the network and volunteer force in place to achieve great things for schools and other community programs. But we must remember that in order for parents to feel appreciated and welcome, volunteer work must be meaningful and valuable to them. Capitalizing on the expertise and abilities of parents and family members provides much needed support to teachers and school and program administrators. Your programs should match volunteer skills and availability with needs among students and within the school. Remember to provide some alternatives to the challenges of volunteering during school hours.

- In cooperation with the school or program administration, conduct a "School Climate Survey." Is your school's climate warm and friendly to parents? Use the information received to guide efforts to make your program's climate more inviting or to enhance its already friendly climate.
- Host a "How You Can Make a Difference" orientation session each year at which you provide training for both volunteers and school or program staff. Training should include clear expectations and guidelines for volunteer and staff roles, as well as provide the opportunity for school or program staff to demonstrate equipment use or address other relevant topics. Provide a handbook of written guidelines jointly created by both parent and staff representatives. The handbook should provide information about school policies; address the issue of confidentiality and appropriate handling of student information; and acquaint volunteers with the behavior, actions, and etiquette needed while in the classroom. A telephone roster of all volunteers should be provided so that a substitute can be arranged for when a volunteer is unable to carry out his or her responsibilities. Keep in mind that research confirms that programs in which volunteers work with children are more successful and have more dependable volunteer support than those that ask volunteers to provide only clerical support or other jobs that do not involve children. Always remember to treat volunteers professionally and with respect.
- Create volunteer opportunities that go beyond traditional tasks that volunteers perform. For example, at the secondary level, consider a "Parents in the Halls" program that encourages parents to drop in and get their exercise walking at the high school instead of at the gym.

Standard V: School Decision Making and Advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

When parents are involved in decision making, schools have higher levels of student achievement and greater public support. Schools and programs that actively enlist parents' participation and input, value parents as full partners in the education of their children. Mutual support of each partner's efforts is critical to student success. Parents should be partners in collaborative decision-making processes on all issues affecting students—from school curriculum and course selection, to discipline policies and overall school reform goals. The most important factor in effective decision making is building a foundation of trust and respect between educators and parents.

- Develop a parent/family involvement policy to establish the vision, common mission, and foundation for parent/family involvement programs in your community. This work can be done with students, parents, teachers, school administrators, community leaders, and businesses.
- (Note: You may refer to sample policy in the Standards booklet.)
- Seek out parent perspectives and input by including a mini-poll (one question) in each school newsletter and making it easy for parents to provide feedback either by phone, voice mail, e-mail, or mail.
- Sponsor an "Advocate Training Program" where parents learn how to understand the school system and how to advocate effectively for their children in school situations such as parent-teacher conferences, school board meetings, and in public forums where decisions are being made that affect children.
- Don't forget the simple, day-to-day interactions that foster a climate of genuine advocacy. For example, remind both parents and educators to be respectful of each other in their interactions, especially in front of children. Remember, if parents side with students against teachers in front of their children, or if teachers communicate disrespect of a child's parents in front of their students, ultimately the student is the one who loses. Resolve to work together with respect to air differences and concerns and to come to agreement for the benefit of the child.

Standard VI: Collaborating with Community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

Communities offer a wide variety of resources that are valuable to schools and families. When schools and communities work together, both are strengthened and mutually benefit from the partnership. This connection encourages families to use community resources and support services. Community partnerships also foster student participation in community service and provide them with learning opportunities beyond their school environment. Partnerships encourage greater interaction among parents and other community members and promote programs that fully support public education.

- Sponsor an annual "Give Back Day" where students go out into the community to perform needed work or services. Coordinate your student activities with local authorities, a chamber of commerce, or city council to find the most appropriate services.
- Involve senior citizens in volunteer projects and programs. Host an open house at a local senior citizen center to recruit volunteers. For secondary schools, you could start a "Senior-to-Senior" program, where high school seniors would host senior citizens coming into the school to share life or work experiences as a part of a social science or history class.
- Develop paycheck-sized cards with tips for how parents can foster their child's success. Contact employers about including the cards with employee paychecks.

Stepping Into Action

The following, outlines a more formal approach to implementing the standards in your school or program. Take a look at the "Where to Begin" section of the Standards booklet. These "Action Plan" steps will give you a guide to follow to help you build a school or program that truly includes parents and families.

1. **Create an action team.** When you create an action team, try to include representatives of all of the stakeholder groups—families, students, administrators, businesses, and community members and organizations.

2. **Examine current practice.** Your team may decide to conduct a survey to find out how parents are involved in your school or program now and how they would like to be involved. In your survey, remember to include some specific examples and possible options for involvement built around the six standard areas. You may want to use the "Checklist for Quality Indicators" included in the Standards booklet to help evaluate your current programs and practices.

3. **Develop a plan of improvement.** Based on your evaluations and survey findings, your team should be able to identify some priority issues, recognize areas for improvement, and establish an action plan. A basic "Action Plan Worksheet" is also provided in the Standards booklet.

4. **Develop a written parent/family involvement policy.** One of the best tools for solidifying your team's vision, support, and goals for parent involvement programs is to develop a parent/family involvement policy. Again, guidelines for developing such policies and a model policy can be found in the Standards booklet.

5. **Secure support.** Determine what logistical support and financial resources need to be secured to carry out your projects and plans. All of the stakeholders should explore what resources they can offer. Keep in mind that parents' buy-in and support is often the most valuable contribution they can make.

6. **Provide training for project/program staff.** All participants shoul *l* understand what role they have in making the program a success. Clear communication is essential. Everyone needs to understand specifically what you're doing and why you are doing it.

7. **Evaluate and revise the plan.** Truly involving parents and families is not just a series of one-shot activities or projects, it is a continual process. Once you begin a program or activity, it is important for all stakeholder representatives to evaluate and revise the plan as needed.

We recognize that these action steps are not going to happen overnight, as building successful programs to include parents and families takes a lot of patience, time, and effort. But, National PTA firmly believes that successfully engaging parents and families in the education of their children has the potential to be far more effective than any other type of education reform.

We also recognize that what we are asking you to do is to change your thinking and your way of doing things to more effectively involve parents and families. Change is threatening and difficult. Some researchers believe that change involves a process of moving from denying that change is needed, to being angry about needing to make change, to seeking compromise between our old and new ways of thinking, to finally fully embracing the needed change in our attitudes and our behaviors.

What we are asking you to do today is:
1. to remember the value of parent and family involvement for all children

2. to open your mind to a new way of thinking about what true parent and family involvement means
3. to explore new ways to effectively engage parents and families on behalf of children by using the six National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs

I'll close with this example of change, which many of you may have already heard, but it bears repeating and hopefully will help us remember how important change can be:

For more than 60 years, Swiss watchmakers dominated the world market of mechanical watches. They were constantly improving the way they made their watches and came up with many enhancements during the time they were the world leaders in watches. Even so, when the idea of electronic quartz movement was presented to Swiss manufacturers (it was even invented by the Swiss), the idea was dismissed. The Japanese, however, took one look at this electronic quartz movement, and the rest is history. To demonstrate my point, how many of you today are wearing a Swiss mechanical watch?

This example from the business world speaks to the cost of not being open to a new way of thinking and also shows the lasting effects of lost opportunity because of the inability to change. The challenge for those of us involved in schools or programs that serve children is to open ourselves up to a new way of thinking and a new way of doing things when it comes to approaching parents and families.

The National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs is a tool to help you implement this needed change in the way we view parents and families and their impact on student success. I encourage you to be open to change and commit to one action step that you can take as an individual to support parent and family involvement. It may be making a phone call to the home of one of your students to let that family know something positive about the child's performance at school. As an administrator, maybe it's committing to making a list of stakeholders that you want to call together to review your current programs and suggest changes based on the six standards. Or, as a parent, giving yourself credit for what you already do to support your child, and being open to other options within the schools or programs where your child is involved.

Remember, all parents care deeply about their children and want the best for them. Find effective ways to tap into that reservoir of love and concern, and your schools and programs will never be the same.

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